

By Rep. Allen West

In his 2010 State of the Union address, [President Obama](#) made a commitment to expand export opportunities for American small businesses. He spoke of the benefits of international trade, and I was optimistic about the future of U.S. exports.

Unfortunately, over a year later, we are still hearing the same rhetoric on trade, but have yet to see any real action. The president has failed to initiate any new trade talks, and despite voicing support for the United States' three pending free-trade agreements, he has continually declined to force action on them.

Last month, the Obama administration announced additional stipulations on these agreements — which will further delay their implementation. Passing the United States' pending free-trade agreements as well as initiating trade talks with other nations would have a tremendous impact on American small businesses and help get our economy back on track.

U.S. exports are at an all-time high, and our small businesses deserve a lot of the credit. According to the [U.S. Department of Commerce](#), small businesses account for nearly 97 percent of all U.S. exporters in 2007 and support nearly 4 million U.S. jobs. I urge President Obama and those in the Senate to work with the House to pass these free-trade agreements and continue this positive trend.

Since negotiating its first agreement in 1985, free-trade agreements have become an integral part of U.S. trade policy. They eliminate monetary tariffs and other barriers on goods, which simplifies the exporting process and allows for greater profit margins for small businesses. The United States concluded trade negotiations with [Panama](#), [Colombia](#) and [South Korea](#) in 2007. Yet because of the Democrat-controlled 110th and 111th Congresses' inaction, the agreements have not been implemented.

There are consequences to our inaction. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the United States could suffer a net loss of more than 380,000 jobs and \$40 billion in lost export sales if we fail to implement these agreements. Further, Panama, Colombia and South Korea

are all negotiating free-trade agreements with other nations, including Canada and the [European Union](#)

. Once these agreements go into effect, our small business exporters will be placed at a major disadvantage.

Quite simply, passing these free-trade agreements means an increase in American jobs. With new export opportunities come new production demands, which in turn create new jobs. These jobs would come from both direct exports and indirect exports, which encompass small businesses that supply larger companies' exports. The International Trade Commission estimates that implementation of these three free-trade agreements would increase U.S. exports by at least \$13 billion and add \$10 billion to the U.S. gross domestic product. Such an increase in U.S. exports could create 250,000 American jobs.

Free-trade agreements also mean leveling the playing field for American small businesses. Currently, Colombia and Panama apply tariffs of 15 percent and 7.1 percent on U.S. exports of manufactured goods and 17 percent and 15 percent on agricultural goods. In contrast, products from these two countries typically enter the U.S. market duty-free. In 2011 alone, U.S. exporters have already paid more than \$3.5 billion in tariffs that would be eliminated upon full implementation of these agreements.

With the unemployment rate at almost 10 percent and the economy struggling, there is a need to take advantage of every opportunity that would help small businesses. In addition to their economic benefits, passing free-trade agreements would provide increased national security and improve our relationships with foreign governments.

In this globalized world, free trade has become a critical component to small business growth and success. Small businesses rely on exports to increase their sales and strengthen their long-term viability. Small businesses are our job creators and hold the key to solving the country's long-term unemployment problem. We must remove these burdensome trade barriers and create an economic environment that allows them to flourish.

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